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CIA Can Keep University Contacts Secret

By LARRY MARGASAK.

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A court ruled Tuesday the CIA can keep its relationships with universities secret because of the danger that disclosure would pose to the agency's intelligence operations.

Any information about a specific school's relationship with the spy agency can help foreign intelligence organizations, said a unanimous three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington.

Since disclosure could compromise sources and reveal methods of CIA operations, the information is exempt from release under the Freedom of Information Act, the court said.

The appellate judges, upholding a lower court decision, turned down a Freedom of Information Act request from a University of California at Los Angeles student. The student's lawsuit sought disclosure of past and present arrangements and relationships between the CIA and the 11 University of California campuses.

The CIA refused to confirm or deny the existence of any documents revealing covert CIA connections with the university or its staff.

"Disclosure that such contacts were made or not made at the University of California, or at any particular school, would trigger the danger that foreign intelligence agencies could (and would) discover who those covert contacts were....," said the opinion by Judge Oscar H. Davis.

Davis, a U.S. Court of Claims judge, sat on the appellate court in this case.

Davis said foreign intelligence agencies, upon learning of such relationships, could also try to prevent nationals from their countries from attending a particular university. And he said foreign countries could cut off contacts between their scholars and U.S. academics.

The judge noted that the CIA acknowledges it collects confidential information and advice from academics who travel abroad and study a subject pertinent to foreign intelligence. The spy agency has also acknowledged that academics help recruit foreign intelligence sources and consult with CIA research analysts.

"The nub of this case is whether the CIA can say whether or not it has had such covert contacts at California without undermining the confidentiality of its intelligence sources, as well as those obtained through its hidden contacts," the opinion said.

"The agency has met the burden of showing that it acted permissibly in its judgment that to reveal or acknowledge covert contacts with the university (of California) might very well disclose some sources or methods of foreign intelligence and that the agency's judgment must be accepted."